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METER, PARALLELISM, AND TROPES: THE SEARCH FOR POETIC STYLE

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Through the last quarter-century there has been no cessation of interest in or analysis of biblical poetry, but most investigations have been of individual poetic units, an enterprise that is absolutely necessary and fruitful in the effort to define biblical poetry. The last several years, however, have seen a commendable renewal of interest in the nature and definition of Hebrew poetry in the form of large-scale efforts to answer in some systematic fashion the question: What is Hebrew Poetry? One thinks of the works of Stuart, Geller, Collins, O'Connor, and Kugel as well as the collected studies of Noel Freedman, which are also moving toward a systematic approach. There are points of sharp contrast and similarity among these works, but all of them are characterized by fresh perspectives, application of new methods or theories, and a fairly broad base of examples out of which the system is erected. The most important of these are James Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* and Michael O'Connor's *Hebrew Verse Structure*, which are as impressive for their erudition and massive control of material as they are for their freshness of approach. They go in somewhat different directions, but they will probably provide the primary touchstones for the many conversational partners who will continue to work on the basic quetion.

My own thinking about the subject of biblical poetry these days is much influenced by Kugel's work and I find myself using his approach and testing it as I read 'poetic' texts. Two basic theses appear to me to lie at the heart of Kugel's constructive (as distinct from his historical) contribution. They are:

a. The feature commonly identified as parallelism is better understood as the rhetorical structure of *seconding* and *closure* as a way of organizing the basic elements of a poetic unit.
b. Prose and poetry are a matter of degree (p. 302).

Each of those theses, of course, needs and receives from Kugel much elaboration, and they are clearly related to each other. Working with them over a period of time, which means attempting to think them through conceptually or theoretically as well as trying to apply them against texts, I find myself appropriating and confirming these two conclusions and working hypotheses in the analysis of Hebrew poetry (and prose, for that matter).

Parallelism

With regard to parallelism, a term that in Kugel's analysis is largely inaccurate as a description of the rhetorical feature to which it points, but will have to be maintained because of its familiarity, understandability, and staying power in the field, Kugel's analysis differs from the other analytic systems being proposed in that while it is fresh in its conclusions, the approach is more traditional and rhetorical, while the works of Geller, Collins, and O'Connor take a grammatical and syntactical approach that arises out of developments in modern linguistics, especially transformational grammar.

With trying to compare or contrast Kugel with these other quite different approaches, I would see three positive results of his understanding of the phenomenon dubbed parallelism:

a. Kugel identifies this rhetorical feature as *the* defining characteristic of biblical poetry (e.g., p. 86). Other poetic elements or aspects are not as fundamental. I take it that Kugel sees this seconding, emphasizing feature followed by full closure as the characteristic that is most consistent and predictable. It can be counted upon to appear in successive lines though the particular manifestation of this rhetorical feature may vary from line to line. I assume with Kugel that definitive characteristics should be those that are regular and predictable. I have said elsewhere [*Theology Today*, 39 (1982), pp. 331-34] that I think the system needs to give some accounting of those occasions where the seconding breaks across the closure or caesura and *lines* are 'parallel' and not just cola, but I do not see this as a large problem, both because the cases are not extensive and the analysis can be modified to recognize a more elaborate seconding

move and a preliminary as well as final closure that serves to create an even greater disjunction between parallel lines and those that follow than exists between individual lines (e.g., Is. 49.2; Ps. 106.24-25).

It should be noted that there is a clear anticipation of Kugel's interpretation of parallelism in the work of Herder, whom Kugel cites once but does not draw upon extensively. He remarks with regard to the two cola of a line: 'The two divisions of their chorus confirm, elevate and strengthen each other in their convictions or their rejoicings'. And further on with regard to the second or B colon: 'It changes the figure and exhibits the thought in another light. It varies the precept and explains it, or impresses it upon the heart' (*The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 40 and 41). S.R. Driver in his *Introduction* (p. 362) gives a similar definition in a sentence or two.

These anticipations of Kugel's definition do not diminish the significance of his contribution. On the contrary, if there were not such anticipations of a modern approach at earlier stages, one would inevitably raise questions about an analysis that claimed consonance with the data when so many predecessors fail to see such consonance. The large contribution of Kugel is to develop in extensive and rigorous fashion an approach to poetic style and the poetic line that is only hinted at or suggested in brief fashion by others. Further, his strong presentation of the case gives us some new perspective and vision for seeing things in earlier studies that may have escaped our attention.

b. Kugel provides a general and all-encompassing definition but one that accounts for and allows for the great variety of form that in fact exists. He says that parallelism is of one or many sorts but not three. That is correct. Most of us have accepted, parroted, and worked with the notion of three types of parallelism although our actual experience with texts, I am confident, impresses us with the fact that parallelism is both *one and many*. One of the impressive accomplishments of Kugel's work is that his analysis holds these in tension and allows us to see the one in the many and the many out of the one, i.e., to see forest and trees with equal clarity at the same time.

c. The third positive result of Kugel's interpretation of parallelism is that—to use his own analytical structure—it is *valid*; what's more, it is of *value*. And the 'second' statement does indeed underscore and go beyond the first. As I have said elsewhere, it 'meets both the

criteria for a critical tool, that is, truth and usefulness, in that it seems to be appropriate to the data and a more functional and helpful approach for the purpose of reading and interpreting texts. The more complex linguistic systems may have taxonomic usefulness, but are less likely to be exegetically helpful' (*Theology Today*, 39 [1982], p. 334). I have been preparing an essay on 'Poetry and Interpretation' that is intentionally focused at a relatively elementary level. In so doing I have used Kugel's definition as an interpretive tool with individual verses and whole poems. I find it is confirmed by the texts but also illumines the reader's perception of what they seek to express.

Meter

While the question of meter is not a primary concern of Kugel, he cannot seek to characterize biblical poetry without giving some attention to it, which he does with his usual vigor. Kugel's conclusions are largely negative. More specifically, he concludes either that 'no meter has been found because none exists' or that 'parallelism is the only meter of biblical poetry' (p. 301). The relentless search for meter and metrical system may not, however, have been altogether misguided. The persistence of investigation of the question of meter arises not only from the influence of classical notions of verse character but also from encounter with texts that produce in some fashion tonal, phonetic, and length symmetries that press themselves upon our ear and mind. I would draw two fairly modest conclusions out of the data:

a. There is no *clear* system of meter in biblical poetry of the precision of classical meter that leads one to be able to predict how lines will follow in terms of stressed or unstressed syllables or patterns of the same. (The same appears to be true of Ugaritic; cf. D. Pardee, 'Ugaritic and Hebrew Metrics', *Ugarit in Retrospect*, ed. G.D. Young, pp. 113-30.)

b. There seem to be formal elements of phonetic, tonal, or numerical character involved in the notions of symmetry and balance that are at the heart of poetic style in the Bible. Kugel appears to set aside this sense of symmetry or, perhaps more accurately, he regards it as a feature of parallelism or seconding and not to be thought about apart from that. Herder states that connection but without playing down the phenomenon of symmetry: 'And has not the Hebrew

parallelism the most simple proportion and symmetry in the members of its verse, in the structures of its figures and sounds? The syllables were not indeed yet accurately scanned and measured, or even numbered at all, but the dullest ear can perceive a symmetry in them' (*The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, p. 39). There is no question that the symmetry heard by the ear is intimately connected to the seconding and closure, but is it totally controlled by and only a feature of that seconding? I doubt it. In many instances it appears that formulation of the seconding colon is affected by considerations of line length, and Kugel acknowledges this on occasion (pp. 44–47). This formal symmetry exists at least in two ways: a) it is expressed in the sense of limits to length of cola and of lines when compared with the way in which caesura and closure occur in prose texts; and b) it is expressed in the existence of a relatively clear and common balance in cola length when they are paired with each other in a seconding way. Here James Barr in his review of Kugel in *The Times Literary Supplement* may have a legitimate point in noting that parallelism is generally clear and evident in an English translation but the balance of length is much less discernible.

That there are no precise rules even at this level of symmetry may be seen by examining the use of *kol* in B cola where it will serve to balance a line not only at a semantic or rhetorical level but also in length in one case while in another case the semantic balance will occur but imbalance is created in length.

Tropes or figures

As I read with care not only Kugel's work but others and lay them alongside the texts, what is missing in their contributions is a more extended focus on the figurative dimension of poetry. There is considerable confusion in use of terminology, but what I have in mind are more the figures of thought, such as simile, metaphor, personification, metonymy, merismus, and synecdoche, to name the most prominent. This is not a subject that has failed to receive attention in the history of the study of biblical poetry, as Kugel has noted along the way. It certainly was a central concern to Herder, although his treatmment is highly unsystematic. And while Robert Lowth's *Lectures on Sacred Poetry* have become a famous classic because of his presentation of parallelism, few remember or note that he began his series with a number of lectures on figurative style with

some cogent and continuingly useful analyses of metaphor, allegory, personification, and simile. Our contemporary focus on formal characteristics, figures of speech more than figures of thought, and parallelism has served to obscure the role of figures in biblical poetry. Parallelism is a trope or a figure of speech. Indeed, I would concur with Kugel in describing it as *the* trope and certainly the one most characteristic of or definitive for Hebrew poetry. But is is by no means the only one, and neither aesthetic nor didactic concerns can fail to take into account the role played by other tropes. Here is where one explores the common ground between biblical and other poetry. Northrop Frye speaks of poetry as 'a conscious and deliberate use of figures' (*The Great Code* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982], p. 23) and recently suggested that we 'have to consider the possibility that metaphor is not an incidental ornament of biblical language, but one of its controlling modes of thought' (p. 54). One cannot read a Psalm without being literally struck figuratively. To take the one that is before me, Psalm 49, it revolves around the repeated simile that human beings are like the beasts that perish. But the force of that theme is carried even more by other figures: 'their graves (LXX, Syr.) are their homes forever' (v. 12); 'like sheep they are set for Sheol; death shepherds them' (v. 15). Or one is confronted, for example in the 'Songs of Ascents', with extended similes and metaphors in almost every poem that evoke both emotive and cognitive responses (see 124.1-8; 125.1-2; 126.4-6; 127.4-5a; 129.2-7; 131.2; 133.1-3). The famous Day of Yahweh speech in Amos 5.18-20 conveys its word and its power entirely by the contrast of light and the extended simile of the man who escapes one terrible threat after another only to be done in when he thought himself safe and secure at home.

One could go on indefinitely with illustrations, but that is not really necessary. What I am suggesting is the need for a focus once again on the figures as a major aspect of poetic style. I expect there is some important work to be done not only on the figurative style of individual poems but also by way of classification and analysis of the figures of thought in biblical poetry as a whole or particular blocks of that whole. This is the sort of enterprise toward which Lowth made helpful probes, and there are some more contemporary efforts as well, e.g. Dieter Eichhorn, *Gott als Fels, Burg, und Zuflucht*, and Louis Monloubou). Many questions will arise in the process. Are certain poetic units or blocks more tropic than others? Do particular

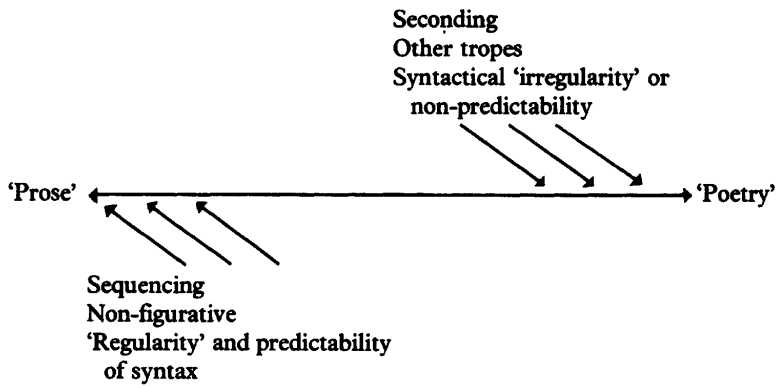
tropes occur more in some kinds of contexts than in others? What are the most common spheres (see Lowth) and subject matter of the poetic figures? Considerable work has been done in the analysis and categorization of metaphors in general that is capable of being applied to the metaphors of biblical poetry (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; M. Black, *Models and Metaphors*). Are there patterns in the choice of metaphors and metonyms in biblical poetry that are shared by other poetic spheres or cultures and are there some that are distinctive? What is communicated in the metaphorical and metonymic choices? Lakoff and Johnson in their study *Metaphors We Live By* point out that metaphors and metonyms 'structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes, and actions' (p. 39), 'are grounded in our experience' (p. 39), and provide a coherent structure for human experience (ch. 15)—and contemporary theologians are ringing the changes on these assumptions. If that is true, then the figurative language of biblical poetry should be—and of course is—able to tell us much about Israel's experience and how they assimilated and understood it.

Of course, figurative language is not confined to poetic literature. The point of Lakoff and Johnson's study is that we use metaphors all the time in all sorts of contexts. Clearly one finds tropes of this sort in narrative and/or prose literature. That seems to me where Kugel's other main conclusion comes in and is both useful, expandable, and subject to testing, i.e., prose and poetry in the Bible are a matter of degree (p. 302). He points out properly that 'parallelism' does not appear at a single level of intensity; nor is it consistently present or absent (p. 95). 'Passages are not either written "in parallelism" or "not in parallelism", but they are elevated with respect to the frequency and intensity of this idealized norm' (p. 87). Biblical poetry, therefore, is a 'complex of heightening effects used in combinations and intensities that vary widely from composition to compostion even with a single "genre"' (p. 94). One is thus faced with a scale with prose on one end, poetry on the other. The more extensive, intense, and complex the heightening effects—of which in Kugel's judgment there are relatively few and seconding is the most common—the more one moves along the scale toward poetry. Often one is in a kind of middle ground. I am not sure how many such heightening effects there are (Kugel only discusses the one, i.e., seconding), but I expect there are more than his statements suggest (here O'Connor's work is suggestive). Regardless of the number, I am

confident that other figures of thought and speech belong on the scale. As they are elevated with respect to frequency and intensity, one is moving further along the scale from prose to poetry or the mode of expression can be said to be becoming more poetic.

One other item, at least, should be included in that scale of degrees. It is word order or syntax. The movement in this case is probably much more abrupt from one end of the scale to the other and a number of features will have to be examined, such as the role of disjunction in 'prose' and 'poetic' texts (i.e., caesura or closure), the function of verbal elements, and the ratio of predictability versus unpredictability between prose and poetry. (Unlike matters of length and tone where predictability would seem to move one further along the scale toward poetry, word order seems to work in reverse.) The following diagram seeks to illustrate how such a scale works.

Criteria or Characteristics of Poetry



In conclusion, let me express my judgment that Kugel's book will provoke students of biblical poetry in many ways and my gratitude that the ways it has provoked me have been good and salutary.

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